

Summary

This thesis explores the way the Internet and the information society are thought of as the new modernising forces in contemporary Indonesia. It is based on research done from January to May 2000 in Jakarta for my studies in anthropology at the University of Amsterdam. The scientific context in which to place this thesis would be: the information society, globalisation, modernity and cultural representations of material artefacts (more specifically: representations of technology).

Initially, my plan was to investigate the way information technologies like the Internet and cellular telephones have helped in spreading pro-*reformasi* (reform) ideas and in the actual organisation of student protests aimed at *reformasi*. Upon my arrival I was struck by the sudden outburst of enthusiasm about the potential of particularly the Internet for development. The central question therefore is: how is the Internet being conceptualised as a means for modernising the country?

The Internet represents a breach from the old order and a new point of focus for conceptualising modernity in this *era reformasi* ('era of reform'). Information technology is seen as the most recent 'road to progress', as well as the standard by which to measure progress itself. This thesis looks in particular at the realm of ideas that surround information technology. Like most material artefacts, the Internet is the object of fantasies, images and expectations. These are ideological constructions, apart from the primary functions, that 'embed' a technology in society, give it meaning and a role to play. These ideas *subjectify*, so to say, a technology. It then becomes some sort of actor with an inherent capacity to do things, like in this instance "guiding Indonesia on the road to global convergence", as one advertisement for an Internet seminar proclaims.

The first chapter sets out to draw the social and political context of *reformasi* in Indonesia. It then moves to a more theoretical level. Topics that are important for the argument are briefly discussed, such as consumerism, information society, and globalisation.

The next chapter gives an overview of the concept of modernity. There has been a shift in the way modernity is seen. Under the New Order, prestigious consumption had been the key symbol of modernity. The discrepancy, however, between the stated goal of general public affluence and the grim reality of unevenly distributed wealth and corruption, has led to a crisis in the concept of modernity. At the dawn of a new millennium, the advent of information technology and the start of a new era called *reformasi* bring about more emphasis on transparency, merit, knowledge and capacity, instead of prestige and connections.

In the third chapter I discuss the historical development of the Internet in Indonesia. The Internet originated in the New Order technocratic ideal of an "information super highway". Instead it was used as a tool against the regime. After that, the Internet becomes more mainstream, a true hype even, especially concerning the promises of e-commerce. In this chapter I also bring up some statistics and discuss the phenomena of the *warnet*, the public Internet access points.

The main argument in the fourth chapter is that online communities are becoming the new elite in Indonesia, based on openness, knowledge and computer literacy, while defining membership by their own set of rules. These 'virtual communities' are the avant-garde that define and set out the communal road to the future.

The final chapter pays attention to tradition, authenticity and cultural diversity. I argue that these concepts are not necessarily contrary to modernity, but are incorporated into it. The attraction of the Internet in conceptualising modernism is that, while the Internet connects people, organisations and countries to a worldwide flow of ideas and goods, it is seen also as a place where cultural diversity can freely roam, as one of the last vestiges of anti-commercial idealism, and as a stronghold against universal mass culture.